

From the
LOUISIANA
State Historic Preservation Office

Office of Cultural Development,
Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

Real-world experience for Chinese preservation architect

Summer Intern Finds Inspiration in New Orleans

By Stephen Fowlkes
Program Coordinator, Historic Building Recovery Grant Program

Imagine getting to live in New Orleans' French Quarter as part of your college experience. That is just what Chinese intern Yuan Ren has done as a summer intern at the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation's Historic Building Recovery Grant Program in the Old U.S. Mint. Midway through her two-year Master of Preservation Studies program at New York City's Columbia University, Yuan has discovered the history and culture of New Orleans while being immersed in one of the world's best preservation learning environments.

Yuan has an architecture degree from Tianjin University, near Beijing in Northern China. (See the following article to learn about her experiences working with architectural treasures in China and her impressions of New Orleans.) Tracy Nelson, Historic Building Recovery Grant Program director, and Yuan's professor at Columbia, Michael

Devonshire, arranged her three-month internship. Nelson envisioned the internship as providing the program with project assistance and offering an intern experience in technical, administrative and fieldwork tasks associated with an active government program giving direct assistance to owners of historic properties. Additionally, the program has offered Yuan an opportunity to observe and consider a wide range of historic preservation issues in and around New Orleans.

Stephen Fowlkes, the program coordinator, managed Yuan's day-to-day assignments and orientation, beginning with a tour from St. Bernard Parish to the 17th St. Canal in Lakeview in order to show the extent and variety of neighborhoods damaged during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and focused on by the Historic Building Recovery Grant Program.

Yuan accompanied staff on visits to grant recipients' properties, observing the program's projects firsthand and meeting the property owners. She toured the New Orleans National Register Historic Districts; visited local landmarks; met with PRC leaders; and also attended New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission, Vieux Carré Commission and neighborhood association meetings. Through these select activities, Yuan was introduced to the area's historical and cultural treasures and acquainted with the many issues facing local preservation agencies and organizations.

Yuan worked on several projects with the program's closed grant case files, such as examining each file to identify missing documentation. She analyzed each project's workscope and performed data entry that will facilitate mapping grant fund expenditure patterns and trends. Yuan also created data pages that will be compiled later into a reference for retrieving information on each case and illustrating program overviews.

Yuan came to New Orleans with a variety of expectations. She hoped to learn how preservation projects work in the "real world," beyond the theoretic-



Photo by Tracy Nelson

Blighted historic properties are one of the many issues introduced to Yuan as part of a thorough orientation to New Orleans' historic districts.

cal discussion that takes place in her classrooms. She wanted to get a sense of the government role in preservation and how it meshes with the efforts of historic property owners. Yuan describes in her accompanying article how impressed she has been by the degree to which many of the grant property owners have gotten involved in their own renovations. She also saw firsthand that successful preservation work depends on excellent communication between the homeowners, contractors and trades people.

Yuan arrived in New Orleans with an interest in how disaster recovery interfaces with historic preservation. Fires, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes and other natural disasters pose constant threats to historic and cultural

houses along the streets have been restored, leaving the historic materials undisturbed. These historic layers are rich enough to make this area a living museum." She goes on to note that the sanitary situation, drainage, traffic, and other problems of a modern, urban area are a challenge to deal with successfully in a delicate historic setting. These features of modern life can take their toll on the historic fabric of the city.

Her visits to Oak Alley, Laura and San Francisco plantations gave a good overview of traditional life for Creoles and other people in the area. The Louisiana Landmark Society's Pitot House on Bayou St. John impressed Yuan with its careful restoration.

And finally, about being a part of



Photo by Tracy Nelson

Stephen Fowlkes and Yuan discuss the Historic Marigny Zoning overlay concept as they take a walking tour of the Faubourg Marigny in New Orleans. This zoning allows small commercial spaces in residential historic districts and encourages a healthy mix of small stores and services in residential neighborhoods.

treasures. "Katrina brought the city a lot of sadness," says Yuan, and the Historic Building Recovery Grant Program "has given a lot of people the confidence to save their own part of New Orleans' history and culture and made it possible for many more people to return home."

New Orleans' historic character and culture have made a strong impression on Yuan. She is impressed that French Quarter colonial-era monuments are still in daily use and observes, "The French Market continues to be used as a shopping place and has become a tourist center. Traditional, vernacular

the Historic Building Recovery Grant Program, she gets a strong feeling that the staff members "...really love what they are doing...and that I should have more passion in my job and coursework as well."

Yuan's analytical work made a significant contribution to the Historic Building Recovery Grant Program and its recovery efforts in Louisiana, and her experience of the city's architecture, culture and preservation activities have nurtured her own passion for historic preservation, which is what brought her to New Orleans in the first place.



Photo by Tracy Nelson

Historic Building Recovery Grant Program staff member Stephen Fowlkes and the program's summer intern, Yuan Ren, discuss ironwork and masonry issues on an Esplanade Avenue house in New Orleans.